

When the Cow Jumps Over the Moon

By Frederick Nenner

Fran wondered how she did it. That cow, all of her, front hooves in the air, back hooves pushing against the sodden earth, and up she goes. Up and over the moon. The wonder of it. Up and over in a sky illuminated by that full moon. And Fran too was illuminated by this cow's delight and the slow drip of the morphine working its way down a twisted piece of tubing that disappeared beneath a white sheet, only to reappear near her neck where it was connected to a jumble of smaller tubes and into her body.

So tired. The sound of the bellows, a rhythm familiar from another time. When was that time? She couldn't remember, but familiar non the less. A thumping noise coming from a machine behind her.

It was her lids. Heavy. Too much energy to keep them up and now they were closing. Slowly closing. Forever. A last glimpse of the cow. When Fran had imagined this moment she took comfort that it would be her children she saw, but now it was the cow. This damn cow. Not her kids, just the cow. Oh well, it was all she had, it would have to do, and it would be alright.

~

The cow, the moon, and remembering. So easy to remember. Three months after the shocking news; the coughing, a breath she couldn't catch, and a flight of stairs she could no

longer climb. Not the pneumonia the doctors expected to find. After many tests, a diagnosis; lung cancer that had spread to the liver and lymph nodes.

“How long?” Fran asked.

So hard to ask, yet she wanted to know. At least with knowing she’d know what had to be done. It’s the way she did things, especially when they were hard to do.

“Six months to a year.”

“Oh my God!”

~

The doctors call it prognosis, she called it a prediction. More like the weather that might come than a terminal illness. As the oncologist said about the ‘prediction’, it comes from the books. How thousands of other patients on average did. That meant with treatment some lived longer, some shorter, most sat in the middle, six months to a year. They could only tell where she fit in after she started treatment.

~

Three months of chemo and it wasn’t going well. First, it was the treatment itself. Weekly infusions in the doctor's office and after each, vomiting and diarrhea that couldn’t be controlled. And then pneumonia and a readmission to the hospital.

"Are we here?" Fran asked her oncologist. It was their code. The time when it was time to call it quits. "When you are well enough to be discharged you'll come to the office and we'll see if we can give you some more chemo."

Did the oncologist think that day would come? Probably not, but who’s to know? Did the oncologist see it was for him to tell Fran that? No, he was just the consultant. It was for the medical team to make that determination and tell their patient. And Fran’s medical team, as

they stood outside her room after making rounds, considering her chance of improving enough to get another dose of chemo, let alone being well enough for a discharge home: "that will happen," they all agreed, "when the cow jumps over the moon."

Fran, through the fog of pain and the morphine, considered that cow, that moon, and the jump. Whether the medical team thought she was out of ear shot, or too sedated to hear, or didn't care if she heard or not, the fact is she did. She heard them and she mulled over this proposition. When the pump pushed meds through her veins, it was a matter of gravity; cows can't fly, or can they? When her mind cleared between doses, it was a different kind of gravity; life, death, prognosis. When the cow wasn't flying, there were decisions, very important decisions to make. Fran knew what she wanted if the medical team was right. Just go peacefully. No machines, no chemo, just comfort. But what if the oncologist, the specialist, the doctor who was managing and treating the cancer that could and would eventually kill her, was right about getting strong enough for another round of treatment? Life, another day with family and friends if the chemo worked this time. There was always time to say goodbye. If there was still a fight to be fought, she was up to it. And that meant doing it without doubt or uncertainty. Like the doctors said, all of them, when she first was diagnosed, "it would take mental resolve along with the chemo to win the war."

Go for it! No living half in and half out. If it didn't turn out the way she hoped, she would change direction. But at least for the time being, no DNR, no DNI, no comfort care. Get better, get discharged, get to the doctor's office, and get chemo.

It didn't happen the way. None of it. Seven days after she made the commitment to fight the fight, she moved squarely into a world of jumping cows. She had difficulty breathing, and with neither a DNR nor a DNI order, she was coded, placed on a respirator, heavily

sedated and transferred to intensive care. And once on the machine, there was no one to say no.

Ten days after the code, Fran's heart faltered and then stopped in spite of the efforts of the medical team pounding on her chest and injecting her with powerful medicines to try to get it beating again.

Not quite the way she wanted it.

And with that, the last cow jumped over the moon.

Frederick Nenner is the Director of the Ethics Consultation Service at a community hospital.

©2015 Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine